

## Introduction

In this article we report on a research project which was designed to evaluate a community based parenting and family support centre in Scotland. Drawing on the experiences of seven fathers who attended the centre and three facilitators, we argue that community level engagement, such as ‘dad’s groups’, can facilitate and encourage men to develop and determine their own understandings of masculinity and fatherhood, while promoting wellbeing and positive outcomes for children.

Fatherhood is an under-explored area in comparison to motherhood and there is little knowledge about group work approaches aimed to support men’s parenting and wellbeing. This article addresses this gap and makes a substantial contribution to knowledge about the lived experiences of fathers. Although this article is focused on a Scottish context, and so is quite specific in terms of policy and legislation, the findings add to the growing body of literature that explores the subjective experiences of fatherhood (Johansson and Andreasson, 2017; Macht, 2017; Plantin et al., 2003).

## Policy context

In Scotland where this study took place, government initiatives have focused on the encouragement of fathers’ active involvement in family life (Robb, 2003; Scottish Government, 2012). This involvement is recognised to be not only beneficial for children (Featherstone, 2009), but also transformative for fathers themselves (Giallo et al., 2018; Macht, 2017).

The Scottish Government’s National Parenting Strategy (Scottish Government, 2012) aims to improve representation for fathers in family policies and services, encouraging and supporting fathers to play an active family role, in line with the Getting it Right for Every Child policy framework (Scottish Government, 2017a). Policy initiatives to support and better understand father’s mental health needs are another area of focus (Scottish Government, 2018) and have resulted in the funding of father centred organisations and groups, for example, Men in Childcare, and Families Need Fathers.

Despite the continued interest in fatherhood by social scientists and policy makers, little is known about what fatherhood means to men, particularly in the context of mental health difficulties and socio-economic disadvantage (Hammařen et al., 2014; Robb, 2003). There is also concern that policies perpetuate gender biases that prevail in cultural stereotypes

(Panter-Brick et al., 2014), inappropriate service provision and narrow understandings about father's roles in the family.

### **Conceptions of fatherhood**

Fatherhood is socially and culturally constructed, and there are changing definitions of fatherhood through time and across different geographical contexts. For example, in modern Europe, fathers were considered more important than mothers in caring, raising and educating children (Lupton and Barclay, 1997) and fathers were expected to be disciplinary figures within the family (Gillies, 2009).

Butler (1990) argues that individuals consciously and unconsciously cite normative scripts of masculinity when performing masculine identities. The 'performative self', argues Butler (2009), involves repetitive behaviours and actions, which are produced as individuals enact their subject position in relation to prevailing discourse about masculinity. Fatherhood discourse continues to be shaped by gendered assumptions of parenting and traditional attitudes to masculinity. In many parts of the world, the father is still expected to be the sole breadwinner, and childcare is primarily seen as maternal responsibility (Gregory and Milner, 2011). Thompson and Holt (2004) argue that men suffer from a 'crisis of masculinity' in their family roles and there is consensus that masculinity has competing and contradictory attributes. Sharpe (1994:36) argues that masculine culture does not create space for men's emotional feelings and this *'implies vulnerability; which may undermine male power on the assumption that it is in contradiction with authority'*.

Hegemonic masculinity is closely linked with phallogentric masculinity; sexuality, sexual practice and the display of phallic attributes (Khan et al., 2009; Stephens, 2007). The genital metaphor of the male phallus suggests power and control, and the social construction of masculine hierarchies, since in a patriarchal society, those with a penis tend to be in positions of power (Linstead and Maréchal, 2015). Khan and colleagues (2009:45) suggest that *'the penis is situated at the core of masculinity'* since it signifies the reproductive capacity for acquiring fatherhood. However, the notion of phallic power is fundamentally paradoxical, since it is dependent upon a system that privileges certain masculine identity positions, when masculinities are contested, multiple and shifting (Linstead and Maréchal, 2015).

Ferguson and Hogan (2004) argue that Connell's (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity is useful to see the way in which professionals constitute men in a 'hegemonic fixated' way;

not because it is how men 'are', but because it helps to understand the impact of cultural ideals and their influences. In this light, it can be argued that 'macho' conceptualisations of masculinity affect popular understandings of fatherhood as unemotive and pathologized (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). As a result of these understandings, men and indeed boys can experience pressures and social expectations that may affect behaviour and life chances. Research by Reay (2002) illustrated the challenges Shaun, a male 'working class' child experienced as he tried to manage social pressures at school. Shaun tried to achieve academically, but the pressures he experienced from his peers thwarted this aspiration. In order to keep his masculinity intact and to maintain his standing with peer groups he disengaged from education.

### *Contemporary fatherhood*

Changes to family forms, such as same-sex parents, single-parents, fatherless families, rising divorce rates, and unwed maternity (Gillis, 2000), together with the model of the 'new father', have shifted societal attitudes and expectations about mothers and fathers roles in the family (Herland, 2019; Lee et al., 2014). The 'new father' model emphasises greater emotional involvement and more shared responsibility of day-to-day care, distinguished from previous disciplinarian and breadwinner roles that fathers were previously expected to perform (Johansson and Andreasson, 2017; Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Ives (2015) describes the shift in the conceptualisation of fathering as 'contemporary fatherhood'. This form of fathering is associated with nurturing the child and contributing to the family economically and emotionally, in consideration of wider concerns about justice, gender inequality and social cohesion.

The contemporary model of fatherhood is considered idealistic and Lee et al., (2014) argue that there is a gap between this model and men's actual experience of fathering. The 'ideal' model of fatherhood does not account for the opportunities and constraints that exist due to class, sexuality, ethnicity, disability and age (Featherstone, 2009). The 'ideal' model of fatherhood has been labelled a middle-class phenomenon and fathers in economically well-off families are more able than working class fathers to fulfil such ideals (Gillies, 2009). Day et al., (2005:341) argue that understandings of fatherhood require '*awareness of the specific cultural, economic, and social conditions which give rise to the norms and behaviours shaping the conduct of fathers*'. These include gendered assumptions about parenting, diverse family forms, socio-economic circumstances and mental health, all of which shape fathering in complex ways. Thus, the 'ideal' fatherhood discourse fails to recognise the complexity of fathering, and the impact of these intersections. Reflexive

fathering, advocated by Williams (2008), pays less attention to normative ideals of fatherhood and emphasises individual practices and men's personal biographies and circumstances. This positions fatherhood as increasingly individualised and evolving within a wider sociological framework that has seen the de-traditionalization of gender and of the family (Williams, 2008).

### **Environmental context**

There is consensus that fathers have the potential to play a vital role in family life. However, there are concerns about the absence of fathers in families, with children growing up without fathers (Phillip et al., 2019; ONS, 2005; Pickard, 1998; Scottish Government 2017b). There were 141,000 lone parents with dependent children living in Scotland in 2015, and the majority were female (91%) (Taulbut et al., 2016). Lone parents tend to be more disadvantaged than parents in couple households, experiencing lower employment rates, and are less likely to report good general health. A total of 41% of children in single parent families in the UK live in relative poverty, around twice the risk of relative poverty faced by children in couple families (Taulbut et al., 2016). The effect of fathers' absence, particularly through loss of financial support, is viewed as a central cause of many of society's problems, including child poverty (Flouri et al., 2015; Popenoe, 1996). However, terms such as 'absent father's' and 'fatherless' families need to be challenged and critically utilised, as it is difficult to decipher the nature and level of fathers involvement with children after separation and divorce. Furthermore, Stoiber and Miller (2005) caution against pathologizing single caregivers and highlight individual differences in coping, adjustment and resilience, which can result in lone parent families thriving.

Nonetheless, research indicates clear links between poverty and parenting difficulties (Daniel and Taylor, 2001). Featherstone et al., (2019) argue for a re-engagement with poverty and social concerns such as addiction and mental health as pertinent to understanding and dealing with harms that children experience. The Growing up in Scotland study (Parkes et al., 2017) identified factors that are predictive of poor father-child relationships, including socio-economic status, employment and working hours, home location and experience of multiple adversities. There is also evidence to suggest links between the experience of living in poverty and the low take-up of services (Katz et al., 2007).

### **Barriers to fatherhood and seeking support**

There is concern that men remain marginalised in social work and that services are not available or appropriate (Hicks 2008; 2014). Christie (2001) argues that men are 'ultra-visible' in child and family social work due to the gendered nature of the care giving task, with men being perceived as both the solution and the problem. Phillip et al.'s. (2019) research on father's experiences of child protection found that the cultural prioritising of the mother-child relationships filtered into social work practice and professional's positioned men in a binary way as either a risk or a resource. Featherstone's (2009) research on father's involvement in social care, found that services constructed fathers as: '*either absent or disinterested*' (161). This binary understanding from professional, can have profound consequences for men, women and children (Phillip et al., 2019). Similarly, Hammarén et al., (2014) reported that social work interventions for men in Sweden were inclined to draw on 'traditional' images of gender that were influenced by a compensatory approach in which men were treated as a problem and a risk in society. Scourfield (2001) also found that fathers in social work were commonly described in pejorative terms. In their review of research into father's engagement in child welfare services in England, Maxwell et al., (2012) found that fathers' engagement was affected by outdated expectations around traditional gender roles and parenting, moreover, the reluctance of fathers themselves impacted on their engagement. The facilitation of fathers' engagement was linked to early identification and involvement in services, proactivity amongst professionals to encourage engagement, and the relevance of services provided.

Macht (2017) argues that fathers want to be more involved in children's lives but continued focus on motherhood hinders the fulfilment of these aspirations. Clapton (2009) argues that gendered understandings are simplistic, and Scourfield et al., (2016) argue that failing to explore the complexities of fatherhood, policy and practice results in stereotypical understandings of parenting, with a focus on mothering and the avoidance of fathers. The National Parenting Strategy (Scottish Government, 2012) reported that fathers felt neither welcome nor supported by family services and were expected to cope while mothers received support. Failure to include fathers in service provision is indicative of attitudes to masculinity that emphasise a certain type of fatherhood and masculinity that values self-sufficiency and independence (Ghate et al., 2000), thus challenging the attainment of the 'ideal fatherhood' discourse.

Alongside poverty and gendered assumptions, there are multiple barriers that face fathers from minority ethnic groups. In addition to language barriers, Mazza (2002) found that young African American fathers felt 'lesser' in society as a result of racism and they experienced

prejudice that defined their role as father as less important than the mother's role. Ockerman (1979) states that when certain groups are faced with marginalisation, this can lower self-esteem, increasing depression, mental health concerns and possible addiction. This chronic sense of low self-esteem, depression and apathy leads to hopelessness (Mazza, 2002). Thus, it is critical that policy and intervention recognise the multiple difficulties and barriers that fathers face.

By examining literature regarding fatherhood, we have shown that gendered assumptions of parenting and traditional attitudes to masculinity can hinder fathers' involvement with their children and can act as barriers to service provision and access. In the following section we consider group work as an intervention, before outlining the underpinning theoretical framework of the study.

### **Group intervention**

Group work is an intervention used in social work to bring about lasting change (Coulshed and Orme, 2012). Ward (2009) highlights the potential of group work intervention as a way to analyse and overcome problems, generate team spirit and enhance creativity. Group work is also a potential method for anti-oppressive practice, giving people an opportunity to take self-directed action and overcome disadvantage (Dowse, 2017; Mazza, 2002).

Numerous studies have reported on mothers' experiences of group intervention to improve parenting (Boddy, 2009; Puckering et al., 1994). Yet there is a dearth of published evaluations about parenting interventions for fathers, particularly in the global south (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Of the published parenting evaluations, the majority tend to target men who have a history of violent behaviour, thus subscribing to the men as 'risk' discourse (Herland et al., 2014).

Ferguson and Hogan (2004) argue that parenting support for fathers requires therapeutic and support work, often alongside their partners and children. Scourfield et al., (2014) evaluated 'Mellow Dad's', a structured group work intervention for fathers that aimed to repair attachments and improve parenting where there were child protection concerns. Scourfield and colleagues found that forming relationships with other fathers was an important way to document practical parenting changes. Mazza (2002) reports that direct practice and peer group support is more beneficial than simply providing parenting information. Group work can break down fathers' feelings of isolation and help members to

recognise themselves as role models for others, not just as fathers or men, but as people, worthy of respect.

## **Methodology**

This study draws on empirical material from a three year evaluation of a Family Centre, where the primary focus was on parenting strategies and outcomes for children. The focus on fathers and masculinity emerged during the project. Participants were recruited through their membership of the dad's group; a voluntary group designed to support and promote men's parenting and wellbeing.

The Dad's group was situated within a Family Centre and offered support for children up to age 12 and their families. The Centre was located in one of the most deprived areas of Scotland (Scottish Government, 2016), meaning that there was greater child poverty, income deprivation and lower than average life expectancy. The group offered weekly support for a core group of ten men who experienced ongoing mental health and parenting difficulties. The sessions lasted for two hours and was followed with a free lunch.

Our theoretical and analytical interest was in investigating how the men experienced and perceived fatherhood. Our departing position is that identity is socially constructed, in that it is enacted and re-enacted in different ways through social relationships. We theorise about the social positioning of the men and the way their identity as men and fathers was constructed, particularly in the context of environmental factors. In doing so, we show how group members re-construct understandings of gender and fatherhood through talk and practices (Butler, 2009; Parton, 2000). The facilitators' perspectives are included to consider the ways in which discourses dilute and or construct gender and father identities (Scourfield and Coffey, 2002).

We carried out two focus groups with group members and three individual interviews. We also observed workshops and social outings attended by group members and other Family Centre users and carried a separate focus group with the dad's group facilitators. The overriding research question was: what benefits do men get from attending the dad's group? We asked the facilitators about the function of the group and the ways it contributed to support the men individually, as well as their children and families.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Stirling and permission for participation in the study was sought from the Family Centre staff and participants. We requested permission to audio-record the interviews, however, one man declined, and so written notes were taken in this instance. Interviews were transcribed in full and reflect a verbatim depiction of speech (Schegloff, 1997). The interviews were coded and then compared, refined, and then comparisons were drawn across interview transcripts to build themes. Transferability was achieved by providing thick description of the phenomenon and the use of quotations from each of the participants. In order to uphold confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms are used throughout.

### *Reflexivity*

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness in the study, the researchers reflexively processed how their own perceptions and experiences influenced the analysis and findings (Eddy et al., 2019). Data collection was carried out by three female researchers and there seemed to be awareness of our presence as outsiders as women, as well as perceptions about our class and cultural differences. It was clear that the researchers' gender played an important role in the interviews and so consideration was given to how positioning impacted the 'research space' (Berger, 2014; McAllister et al., 2019). For example, the men performed masculinity through their actions (Butler 2006). They also appeared to be aware of their self-presentation; they apologised for swearing in front of us on the first occasion but appeared to become more comfortable in our presence after a short period and thereafter-used more swear words, reflecting their everyday vernacular.

When talking about areas that the men lived in, one of the men made direct comparisons to solidify his experiences about living in an area of deprivation: *"I bet where you grew up there were lots of parks and green spaces. Well, where we live, there is nothing like that."* This instance was an example of perceived class and cultural difference and awareness of the socio-economic context and its effects on life chances. As researchers we were aware that as 'outsiders' we could only partially understand what the men said to us, having not experienced living in poverty. We asked open questions to elicit detailed answers and used this positioning to better understand their responses. Such instances provided a foundation for the development of our social constructionist theoretical framework, to explore subjectivities based on the men's perceptions about fatherhood (Dowse, 2017; Parton, 2000).

### **Findings**



In both focus groups there were the same seven men who had children aged between one to 16 years old. The group members were aged between 20-54, all identified as male, heterosexual, six identified as white Scottish and one identified as white British. All men were in receipt of benefits, and all but one of the men were unemployed. Three of the men were single parents. Two female and one male practitioner facilitated the group.

### **Group work**

There was a sense of pride about being a member of the dad's group. The men made decisions about how to spend the allocated budget and they planned the group schedule with the facilitators. The men appreciated the time they had in the group and made good use of it, sticking to topics and focusing on group activities. They also enjoyed the fun side of the group activities, especially the camaraderie between the staff and themselves.

Group sessions involved a combination of structured and unstructured group-based discussion, input from practitioners and activities designed to enhance parenting skills and support wellbeing. The sessions included both 'traditionally' masculine and feminine activities, for instance, discussion about societal problems and mental health. There were also outings, go-karting, bowls and self-care activities such as pampering; facials and making bath-bombs.

The inclusion of child and parent-based activities gave the men ideas and confidence to try out new activities at home or new places to take their children, often with men from the group and their families. These activities helped friendships to develop and gave the men insight into their children's interests and talents and ways to nurture these. The lunch provided an informal opportunity for conversations to continue.

### **Mental health**

All of the men had or continued to experience mental health difficulties, which at certain times dominated their lives and negatively affected their self-worth, confidence and availability as parents. The men described their engagement with the group in terms of feeling safe, which allowed them to be frank about their concerns, anxieties and worries about being fathers. The safe, accessible and familiar environment of the group allowed them to relax and be themselves. The men supported one another to develop self-respect and confidence in their parenting. Having dedicated time for discussion, socialising and reflecting was highly valued, as was the practical support and advice they received from staff and other fathers.

*“I could nae talk to people face-to-face, I’ve built up my confidence and my son benefits” (Scott)*

*“...well I’m no’ so stressed oot a’ the time noo ...because I’ve made new friends, like one o’ them stays just doon the street fae me ... do you know what I mean, so I go and visit them noo and again and things like that” (Arran)*

*‘...if it wasn’t for [the group], I probably wouldn’t be able to cope with any of this...” coming here once a week I get to release some of that stress’ (Charlie)*

Group participation was described as a way to reduce social isolation, overcome difficulties and improve relationships with their children. Charlie described the group as useful as it enabled him to socialise with the other members while his child attended nursery. Formerly in homeless accommodation and latterly at a drugs rehabilitation unit, he said that, “*nobody judges you in here.*” Scott experienced enduring mental health difficulties and had social work involvement throughout his life. He talked about not trusting social workers but trusted the staff at the Family Centre, who listened and helped him with the issues he faced. Staff facilitating the group work demonstrated effective relational practice, which was experienced as timely, empathic, non-judgmental and empowering. Trusting relationships with staff were a step towards the men’s successful engagement with statutory services and in some cases meant that child protection proceedings were withdrawn in light of reduced safeguarding concerns.

### **Parenting in a context of adversity**

All of the men described adversities that affected parenting. A facilitator said that the forthcoming roll-out of Universal Credit meant that many of the men would be economically worse off and there had been an increase of referrals to charities and welfare rights organisations for subsidised holidays and grants. The use of food banks was a normal feature of the men’s lived experience and in fact a necessity for their families’ survival. Facilitators were aware of the socio-economic conditions that disadvantaged the men as well as childhood adversities and limited or unhelpful role models. This contextual knowledge was important to understand how these experiences had affected their identities, life courses and relationships with their children. This awareness chimes with policy analysis and the way that conditionality and sanctions can have adverse outcomes for claimants including increased poverty, exacerbated mental health, pathologization and physical health

conditions (Dwyer, 2018; Wiggan, 2012). Cheetham et al., 2019 found negative consequences for people who claim Universal Credit, including adverse material wellbeing, physical and mental health and social and family lives.

For Charlie, parenting challenges related to environmental concerns, namely “*murders, overdoses, lots of deaths*” which affected his parental availability due to anxiety and compromised the safety of his children. There was a sense that the hostile environment perpetuated societal perceptions about the men as “*tough guys*”. However, Lewis explained that new and unexpected friendships had developed in the group despite ongoing hostility between neighbourhoods.

*“We all come from different areas, places where people get murdered but there’s no fighting between different communities [at the dad’s group]” (Lewis)*

Both group members and facilitators acknowledged how the group provided a platform to improve parenting capacity and challenge dominant gender norms, which enabled them to show their hidden caring and nurturing qualities.

*“[The men in the dad’s group are] very caring, I know they have rough backgrounds and there are gangland fights and everything else, but I don’t see that...you hear some of them have got the reputations of like saying kill or be killed, from their upbringings...for them to be caring and so gentle and committed was a real eye opener for me...these are big gentle giants.” (Facilitator)*

### **Re-constructing masculinity and fatherhood**

Group members had an acute awareness of the politics of their gendered experience and societal expectations; in terms of what they were supposed to be, do, how they ought to do it and how they were expected to cope with life’s stressors (Eddy et al., 2019). Brett emphasised that group discussion about feelings was essential to the success of the group. This viewpoint was driven by his personal experience, since talking to others had been beneficial for him and others. Prospective members were expected to talk, rather than exclusively engage with masculine activities, such as go-karting and snooker but this had put newer members off from joining:

*“...people don’t expect it to be sitting in doing talkative activities, they get hit with ‘oh we’re doing mental health’, I think they want to get out of the house and do something fun” (Brett)*

The men felt that prospective members may be reluctant to engage in group talk and they understood this could be a new experience for some men. The practitioners agreed with this outlook and said that the core group members’ talkativeness could fluctuate depending on their mood or circumstances such as waiting for delayed welfare payment. Practitioners and members were flexible by allowing members to be quiet and realised when they were unable to verbally participate. Lloyd talked about a new member starting the group who took a while to ‘open up’. It was the engagement with a hypermasculine activity ‘go-karting’ that was key to enabling him to bond and subsequently become more comfortable talking in the group setting.

*“We were trying to get a laugh out of the other dad, we went on the go-karts and boom - he came out of his shell” (Lloyd)*

In this case it seems that participation in the physical activity of go-karting was useful in giving the men necessary time to bond before feeling comfortable to engage in more traditionally feminine types of activity, such as talk.

While the men enjoyed competitive and physical activities such as go-karting, snooker and gardening, they also talked about enjoying pampering and had chosen to make use of the therapy room where they enjoyed facials and nail painting. The men were aware that they could be perceived as “*big, heavy men*” and said that they were eager to challenge these stereotypes. One way of achieving this was by being active and helpful in the Family Centre and wider community. Group members took on voluntary roles in the centre and the men had recently cleared the communal garden, meaning it was now better used by families and staff. Lloyd appeared eager to counter unhelpful prevailing stereotypes about men, and this was achieved by creating a visible presence in the community. In this sense, hyper-masculinity such as aggression was rejected, and tolerance claimed by virtue of actively offering support in the community (Anderson, 2009). The men did not concede their position at the top of the hierarchy but actively used it for another traditional masculine presentation, that of helping others (Bengtsson 2016).

*“We want to do things in the community, like a wee tea and coffee, sandwich morning for the pensioners. Because they’re sitting in the nursing home, getting their bum’s wiped, watching the same TV channel every day of the week” (Lloyd)*

### **Reflexive fatherhood**

Becoming a father and expressing a shared understanding of what this meant was a key theme expressed in the interviews. The complexities of being a father included being stigmatised, not knowing how to be a parent or having had no or inadequate role models in their own childhoods. The facilitators’ awareness of these issues influenced the design of targeted activities and enabled men to define their own parenting practices.

*“The dad’s may never have been played with, they weren’t necessarily ‘brought up’ they were ‘raised up’. They may have had an authoritarian figure telling them what to do and what not to do. [We] provided a space with toys, sand and told the dad’s to be kids, they absolutely loved it and it was revealed that some of them had never had the opportunity to be kids before and were told off for getting messy.” (Facilitator)*

Reflections about narrow and restrictive understandings of fatherhood led the men to challenge assumptions and complemented their desire to be better fathers. Lloyd talked about doing his best to provide for his children and grandchildren. He reflected on learning that his teenage son was expecting a baby and said the couple were fearful about whether they could provide for their baby child and deal with social work involvement. Lloyd said he did everything in his power to make sure the family were not separated, and this meant allowing them to stay in his house, despite there being limited space. Lloyd described this action as an extension of fathering. He summarised this and his fathering experience in the following way: *“Any d\*\*\* can make a baby, but it takes a real man to be a dad”*. Lloyd’s bold words reflect phallogocentric conceptions of masculinity; linked to sexual performance and hegemonic masculinity. However, Lloyd also demonstrates the internal paradoxes of masculinity in the way that he claims masculine power with reference to his penis as well as the responsibilities of childrearing and the emotive aspects of this role. This comment suggests that *‘masculinity is a negotiated system of identities’* (Buchbinder, 1998:49).

Brett talked about some of the anxieties he experienced in relation to being a parent, which were heightened by his upbringing and the expected norms he had learnt about physical affection and masculinity.

*“The way I was brought up, you don’t hug men, you handshake men. You don’t kiss and cuddle children, that’s...you just don’t do that. So for the first four or five years I didn’t really show [my son] a lot of love and affection. That’s adapted onto me, I didn’t want to touch guys, I’d go to work as long as I could then go home and then I’d go to work but I think after three or four months of doing this, I thought I can’t be doing this, I got to be changing a wee bit and stuff like that. I don’t know if it’s the age aspect...things have changed a bit. I’m still stuck in that mind-set of before having a kid....I’m young I should be able to do this, but I’ve dropped straight out of school, got a job, got a flat and had a wain. And it’s that you’re stuck in that middle ground, can I do this, can I not do this”*

Brett reflected that the strategies he previously employed were aligned with a distanced approach to parenting, but this was not productive to his emerging identity as a father. Brett worked around 60 hours a week receiving the minimum wage which only just provided him and his family the income they needed to survive. He felt that creating emotional and physical distance from his family allowed him to focus on being the breadwinner and to deny his emotions and vulnerabilities (Sharpe, 1994). The group challenged this orientation and encouraged him to be more involved as a father while still maintaining his male identity. Brett’s engagement with the group helped him to feel connected to a larger community, to push back against anachronistic understandings of masculinity and as a result, to be more available to his son.

### ***Parenting: Challenging gender constraints***

Forming appropriate nurturing and safe attachments with their children was a key outcome that the facilitators aimed to achieve through the group intervention. Arran wanted to be an active father but was unsure how to achieve this. He reflected on his early parenting experience and the fear that he would be viewed with suspicion if he took care of his child’s physical care needs, such as nappy changing and feeding. Arran explained that he still struggled to bond with his daughter, and his insecurities were exacerbated by the stress of dealing with his partner’s terminal health diagnosis, isolation and money worries.

*“Well I’ve got a six-year-old daughter; when she was first born I wis’nae really bonding wi’ her...other dad’s reassured that me she is my daughter, that I shouldn’t be worried about things like...changing her nappy...but the Dad’s group helped me learn how tae bond wi’ her properly and things like that ... it just gets me out the house as well, do you know what I mean.”*

Arran benefitted from sharing his concerns and fears with other fathers, particularly those who had daughters. The other men were able to acknowledge his concerns while reassuring him that he was capable of providing the support his daughter needed. During one group session, Arran talked about struggling to settle his daughter at night and shared concerns about how he could offer her love and affection, such as kisses and cuddles. He also felt challenged by the expectation to read his daughter bedtime stories, particularly as he felt that he was not good at reading and his deep voice did not make this experience relaxing. The other men and staff reassured him and offered suggestions. This was one of many conversations where the men shared concerns and gave one another suggestions, encouragement and boosts of confidence. There was a sense of relief in Arran being able to talk about his problems and a shared sense of satisfaction from the men who offered suggestions and actively supported him. Lewis was one of the men in the group who listened and counselled Arran. He talked about the rewards of being able to help other men by drawing upon his lived experience.

*“Coming here opened my eyes. I spoke to dads, they gave me ideas, it helped, I could speak to dads [about] what they’ve already been through, what they did. If other dad’s come in with the same problems I can help them.” (Lewis)*

Peer support was therefore a significant factor in the success of the group intervention. The facilitators said that group members responded to each other and noticed other’s symptoms, problematic habits and patterns of behaviours. They were described as “*protectors*” to one another; teaching and supporting others to develop new skills and offering emotional support as well as “*banter*”. One facilitator gave the example of a group swimming trip, where it emerged that one of the men could not swim. He did not own swimwear and so cut his jeans to make swim shorts. The other men held his body and physically guided him across the pool. The facilitator said this act was a reflection of the trusting relationship that the men had established and how he was helped to overcome his fear and move forward; this

example is indicative of the broader study findings about how the group members collectively improved wellbeing and parenting.

## **Discussion**

The findings suggest that participation in the dad's group helped the men to become more involved fathers and validated the men's construction of fatherhood. Regular participation was cited as a positive contributor to the men's wellbeing and helped them to rebuild confidence, tackle some of the symptoms of depression, and reduce social isolation. Through group work, the men were re-positioned as having the capacity and skills to be 'good' fathers and 'new men'. The men felt able to show their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and their connection with other group members showed that they were worthy of friendships beyond their local communities and could be role models.

The foundation and safety of the group allowed the men to express themselves in ways that a heteronormative society did not usually allow. The group allowed the men to push back against restrictive understandings of masculinity, and enabled the men to identify with a plurality of masculinities, promoting a 'reflexive' understanding of fatherhood (Williams, 2008). In a similar way to Reay's (2002) study of masculinity, the men were able to 'offset' masculinity by engaging in activities such as facials while retaining a connection to traditional masculine roles and activities, for example, clearing the communal garden and physical, competitive activities. The men were therefore able to regulate their performances of masculinity allowing for more fluid expression of identity, while working on overcoming their ongoing parenting difficulties.

Group discussion allowed the men to articulate and reflect on their lives, the adversities they faced and the fearful characteristics of modern parenting culture, such as showing affection (Lee et al., 2014). In the context of multiple adversities experienced by the men; continued welfare reform, capped benefits, rising living costs and political and societal pressure to be an 'ideal father'. Sharing feelings, experiences and soliciting advice appeared to be key constructive engagement strategies for the men, which helped them to express themselves and feel a sense of satisfaction by being able to help others. Dowse (2017) likens this to 're-authoring', as the men were re-positioned, and their strengths acknowledged and celebrated, rather than their deficits highlighted. The facilitators' understanding of the men's biographies allowed them to tailor support to overcome isolation and helped to challenge hegemonic understandings about fathers.



It is important to acknowledge that we as researchers inadvertently maintained binary notions of characteristics, traits, appearances, interests, and behaviours by presenting them in this article as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. This is of interest given our overall thesis is that the dad's group allowed for an enriched experience of masculinity for group members. Binary conceptions of masculinity and femininity can constrain what we think and who we can be. Yet, Connell (1995) argues that we can only define masculinity and femininity in relation to one another and in doing so we reify these binary categories. Paechter (2006) argues that binary categorisations draw us into unhelpful discourse for theoretical thinking, because in any social grouping there are a number of masculinities, with intersecting power relations. Moreover, masculine and feminine understandings vary according to time, place and circumstances. Therefore, our findings provide 'tip of the iceberg' stories about the men's lives, suggesting that the bigger part of life sits unseen beneath the iceberg (Dowse, 2017). This is important to acknowledge and shows awareness of the subjective research process as we draw attention to certain aspects of the men's experiences, rather than a holistic, representative understanding of fatherhood. Nevertheless, the findings are significant as they highlight the importance that group work played for these men, and how this helped them to parent in a context of adversity, to cope with, overcome and/or challenge their own mental health difficulties and disturb dominant understandings about masculinity and fatherhood.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have examined the function of a group intervention for fathers and we have explored some of the contradictions of fatherhood and the structural changes that effect father's lives. We have shown the value of group work with marginalised fathers and how peer support and the engagement and availability of activities enabled men to re-construct their identities and change expectations and aspirations about masculinity and fatherhood. We have shown how the men overcame the contradiction between maintaining an image of power and authority in society, becoming emotionally closer to children, showing their feelings and encouraging and supporting one another. The result is less restrictive accounts of gender.

Community level engagement, such as dad's groups, can facilitate and encourage men to develop and determine their own understandings of masculinity and fatherhood, while promoting wellbeing and positive outcomes for children. Information, resources, and support to strengthen the quality of family interactions are important targets for policy and

prevention efforts to promote the health and wellbeing of children and families. The promotion of group work for men has the potential longer-term effect of reducing the stigma that surrounds men accessing family and parenting support; this is significant given the extensive barriers that stop men from seeking support.

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